

## **A Campaign Instead of A Debate**

In December 2008, the Center for Research on Antisemitism (ZfA) held a conference on the theme of "Enemy Stereotype: Muslim – Enemy Stereotype: Jew", which focused on an increasing hostility towards Muslims in Germany but also dealt with antisemitic stereotyping, in particular among youth with an immigrant background. Shortly before the conference, several essays from the ZfA on the theme of anti-Islam stereotyping were published in the Yearbook of Research on Antisemitism, triggering an emotional response ahead of the conference among those who apparently prefer not to distinguish between academic research on one hand and political or moral campaigns on the other. The blogosphere became the scene of angry fights (conducted largely without any regard for standards of decency). Following the conference, the campaign against the Center for Research on Antisemitism, its director and individual employees took off in some foreign media, and particularly in the blogger scene. This continues to this day with a kind of obsession that creates the impression that a small number of journalists and bloggers claim the sole right to interpret antisemitism, regardless of serious academic examination of the phenomenon. In particular, the Jerusalem Post correspondent in Germany appears to have – aside from the subject of Iran – no knowledge of any other political or social issue in Germany other than the Center for Research on Antisemitism and its director. Time and again, new variations on this theme appear, construing connections that simply do not exist. In one of his most recent concoctions, published in the Jerusalem Post on 6 March 2010 under the title "German center dismisses pro-Israel scholar", the correspondent goes so far as to claim that the ZfA used "mafia like tactics" to muscle a "scholar" off the editorial board of the new online publication, "Journal for the Study of Antisemitism". The "scholar", who agitates against the ZfA in his blog, is in no way connected with our Institute and neither the director nor staff of the ZfA has ever suggested having him removed from any board. The online journal published an essay by this individual in its first edition (June 2009: [http://www.jsantisemitism.org/pdf/jsa\\_1-1.pdf](http://www.jsantisemitism.org/pdf/jsa_1-1.pdf)) in which he accused the ZfA and some of its staff of equating "Islamophobia" and antisemitism and implied that the ZfA failed to take antisemitism in the Islamic world and among the political left seriously, and therefore ultimately trivialized the Holocaust. He even goes so far as to accuse the ZfA of expressing a secondary antisemitism. The essay is not a scholarly debate about the subject, but rather a polemic pamphlet. It is up to the editor to choose the contributions they consider worthy of inclusion in their

publication and to decide how to deal with members of their board; the ZfA has nothing to do with either. The claims of the Jerusalem Post correspondent to the contrary border on character assassination and are unworthy of a serious newspaper.

This episode is only one among many in which the Germany correspondent of the Jerusalem Post has suggested that the director of the ZfA and the Institute itself are "controversial" or that there is great "controversy" surrounding the Institute. A small number of journalists and bloggers contribute to this appearance. They try to create the semblance of respectability by constantly citing one another and suggesting that there is serious criticism of the ZfA "abroad" or in "Israel and the USA." Readers are thus misinformed and have no way of understanding how these kinds of articles come about. They don't know what questions might have been asked "abroad" about the ZfA by scholars or Holocaust survivors. Often, these are leading questions asked of people who know neither the ZfA nor its staff, and who answer as the journalist intends.

A year ago, staff from the ZfA made themselves available to answer the questions of the Jerusalem Post correspondent, to explain to him that neither the conference in December 2008 nor the related publications intended to equate the fear of Islam with antisemitism, but that rather the issue was and is about scientific methods of comparison. But there was apparently no willingness to discuss these points. This is most likely because the view of the phenomenon of antisemitism is very narrow, using the genocidal form of antisemitism as a frame of reference. A comparison that attempts to analyse differences and similarities between prejudices against Islam and antisemitism using scientific methods must go back to the period before the Holocaust, looking at forms of antisemitism from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which both resemble but also of course differ from today's hostility against Islam.

No effort is spared to inject currency into the thesis that the ZfA trivializes the Holocaust by allegedly equating hostility against Islam and antisemitism, or to accuse the director of the Institute of antisemitism. The Nazi-past of the director's thesis advisor, Prof. Karl Bosl, of Munich, is brought up in order to accuse a scholar who has dealt with the themes of National Socialism and its consequences for more than 40 years of having a secret affinity towards Nazi-era racial policies. In an e-mail sent to staff of the ZfA, the Jerusalem Post correspondent even asked about the Nazi past of the parents of Institute Director Prof. Wolfgang Benz. Moreover, in the same e-mail the correspondent demanded to know how many Jews are working at the ZfA!

Despite recurring attacks against the Institute and its staff, the ZfA has long withheld comment because neither the German press nor the serious foreign press have joined in this canon of absurd accusations, but rather have fulfilled their role as critical and serious journalists. The objectivity of the Jerusalem Post's Germany correspondent may in fact have been clouded by the fact that he was registered as a PhD student at the ZfA, but then had difficulties with a foundation because of the scholarship they had provided for him, funding which he accepted without fulfilling his academic requirements. In the end he withdrew his dissertation at the ZfA. His campaign against the Institute then began.